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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MUSCAT 000162

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STATE FOR NEA, NEA/ARPI, NEA/ELA, INR/B

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [EAID](#) [KPAL](#) [PARM](#) [KNNP](#) [PINR](#) [XF](#) [MU](#)

SUBJECT: MFA ARAB CHIEF ON IRAN, PALESTINE, SYRIA

REF: A. MUSCAT 134

- [1](#)B. MUSCAT 130
- [1](#)C. SECSTATE 11443
- [1](#)D. STATE 19516
- [1](#)E. STATE 8416

Classified By: Ambassador Richard L. Baltimore III.
Reason: 1.4 (b, d).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) In a February 5 meeting with Pol/Econ Chief, MFA Arab Affairs Chief Ambassador Ahmed al-Harthy expressed deep misgivings about the IAEA's decision to report Iran to the UN Security Council, fearing the move pushes a diplomatic solution further out of reach. He said recent Oman-Iran discussions on bilateral investment projects were still in early stages, but confirmed Oman's desire to purchase Iranian natural gas. Al-Harthy urged the USG to give Hamas time to reconsider its policy positions, refrain from pre-judging the situation, and to open a direct channel of communication. The question of whether a Hamas-led government would receive direct budgetary support would be decided by Arab League consensus. He feared U.S. pressures were putting Palestinian President Abbas in an impossible position, with dangerous consequences. Al-Harthy reaffirmed there were no plans for a visit to Oman by Syria's president. End summary.

[1](#)2. (C) On February 5, Pol/Econ Chief pulsed MFA Arab Affairs Department Chief Ambassador Ahmed bin Yusuf al-Harthy on a range of regional issues. Al-Harthy had returned just a few days prior from having accompanied FM Yusuf bin Alawi on his visit to Iran (refs A, B); al-Harthy chairs the Omani side of the Oman-Iran Joint Political Committee. He regularly participates in the Omani delegations to Arab League and GCC ministerials, and appreciated the opportunity for a "undiplomatic" discussion. (See bio note in para 11.)

Iran/IAEA: Worried About UNSC Involvement

[1](#)3. (C) As reported ref A, FM Bin Alawi returned from Iran on January 31 conveying Tehran's assertion that a delay of several weeks in the drive to have the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Board of Governors (BoG) report Iran to the UN Security Council (UNSC) would give Iran time to reach a uranium enrichment deal with Russia. Otherwise, Iran threatened to halt cooperation with the IAEA and its inspectors. (Bin Alawi also passed this message to the UK, French and German ambassadors.) Al-Harthy was therefore greatly discouraged and pessimistic over the IAEA BoG's February 4 decision and the predictably harsh initial reactions from Iran (ref D). He underscored Oman's deep desire to see a diplomatic resolution to the impasse, but said the February 4 action now makes it considerably more "complex."

[1](#)4. (C) Iran's position, he opined, will now harden as strong nationalistic elements in Iranian domestic politics pull the nation further from engagement with international institutions. Despite the BoG's overwhelming consensus for its action, Ambassador al-Harthy was under the impression that Iran had been in compliance with its IAEA obligations and that DG ElBaradei (who called on the Omani MFA a year ago) was satisfied with Iran's cooperation. Asked why he would believe Iranian claims about the status of talks with Russia when Russia itself voted in the IAEA BoG to report Iran to the UNSC, al-Harthy opined that Moscow might simply have been bowing to USG pressure. He was likewise under the impression that the Iran nuclear file now rests solely with the UNSC. P/E Chief raised facts to counter Ambassador al-Harthy's presumptions, underscoring that the issue remained in diplomatic channels and that states like Oman must continue sending a consistent and firm signal to Tehran that it must live up to its international obligations. P/E Chief used ref E points to note how Iran's noncompliance undermines Oman's desire to have Israel commit itself to the NPT and other nuclear treaties.

15. (C) Ambassador al-Harthy described the Omani-Iranian linkages that Muscat hopes to wield to keep Iran engaged in the world community. There are at least three separate binational commissions that function: the Joint Political Committee (at the Foreign Ministry level, which al-Harthy chairs); an economic committee chaired by Minister of Commerce and Industry Maqbool Sultan; and a military/security committee (which primarily deals with illegal immigration and smuggling concerns). He said the large investment projects raised in the recent Tehran meetings (ref B) were still in the formative stage, but will be discussed further in the economic committee when it convenes in March. He said there is only one modest Iranian investment project actually on the ground at present, within the Sohar industrial complex. Asked why Oman seeks to buy Iranian gas (ref B) when it already has a purchase arrangement with Qatar and UAE (the Dolphin project), Ambassador al-Harthy said it was unsound to rely exclusively on a single supply source.

 Hamas/Palestine/Israel

16. (C) Al-Harthy attributed Hamas' victory in the recent Palestinian legislative council elections to Israeli policies that have deprived the Palestinian people of any hope in the peace process. With a cat-ate-the-canary grin, he also blamed USG calls for democracy in the Middle East as producing governments with which the USG will not want to deal. He was dismayed by USG statements already indicating that Washington will not provide assistance funds or deal directly with Hamas, rather than taking a more patient course to await formation of a new government. P/E Chief reiterated Washington's praise for the successful conduct of the elections and explained USG statements that funding would not be provided to either terrorist-designated entities or to any future Palestinian government that rejected the peace process in which the USG, international community and Oman itself had so heavily invested.

17. (C) Reiterating Oman's desire for a just peace between Israel and Palestinians, al-Harthy urged the USG to send an envoy to talk directly to Hamas representatives rather than engage in diplomacy via the media. He also said PA President Abbas was placed in an impossible position by the USG preconditions, because backing Hamas would give Israel an excuse to marginalize him as it had done to Arafat, while rejecting Hamas would be both undemocratic and political suicide. Al-Harthy urged the USG to throw Abbas a life-line to survive this transition period in tact. Not least, he said it was paramount to put USG pressure on Israel to achieve broad progress on the roadmap and not resort to further unilateral actions. (On February 7, the Deputy Director of the MFA Under Secretary's office told P/E Chief that the Arab states have always kept Hamas at arm's length and Hamas realizes full well that it needs to moderate its position in order to break down those barriers. He added, however, that Hamas needs some space to take this action and urged pressure on Israel not to target Hamas leaders at this delicate stage.)

18. (C) Asked whether Oman would still provide financial aid to a Palestinian government if run by rejectionist forces, Ambassador al-Harthy indicated that Oman has little choice in the matter. At the annual Arab League summit, a collective decision is made on how much money to contribute to the Palestinians, and in what form (i.e., directly to the PA or to approved third-party NGOs, etc.). Based on that decision, Oman is assigned a specific quota. He could not recall what Oman's dues for 2005 were (it was \$1 million in 2004), but said half went directly to the PA and half to NGOs. If the next AL summit so directs, Oman will do the same in 2006 regardless of who is running the PA.

 Syria - No Bashar Visit on Horizon

19. (C) P/E Chief reiterated ref C points urging Oman not to welcome a visit by Syrian President Bashar al-Asad were one to be requested. Ambassador al-Harthy said he was unaware of any plans for a visit but didn't offer substantive reply as to what might be Oman's response to a Syrian approach. He expressed some surprise by the U.S. demarche, however, saying he had detected a decrease in US-Syrian tensions of late. When P/E Chief disabused him of that notion, al-Harthy asked what is to be gained by such pressure on Damascus. It certainly would not bring Hariri back to life. P/E Chief reminded him of the UNSCRs obliging Syria to cooperate with the murder investigation, noting that bringing the guilty to account would help prevent further such political murders and bolster Lebanon's sovereignty. Al-Harthy retorted pragmatically that Syria and Lebanon will always be closely linked. P/E Chief replied that close relations hardly give Damascus the right to murder Lebanese leaders and journalists. Al-Harthy noted positively that Syria and Iraq

were poised to restore diplomatic relations and hoped that Syria was doing a better job of policing its side of the border.

Comment

110. (C) While Ambassador al-Harthy did not appear to be well-versed on IAEA/UNSC details (the province of a different MFA department), his generously frank views are broadly consistent with MFA and even public sentiments. He aptly summarized the conversation by noting that, while our tactics may sometimes differ, Oman still shares the same goals as the USG. End comment.

Bio Note

111. (C) Ambassador al-Harthy appears to be in his 60's, is about 5'6" with a long white beard. He speaks English fairly well and does not use an interpreter in meetings with Americans. (He often attends the Minister's meetings with visiting USG officials.) He enjoyed visiting both of his sons when they attended college in the U.S. (Oklahoma and Louisiana respectively). Al-Harthy is also related and on close terms with an Omani employee of the Embassy's Public Diplomacy section.
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